

Reviews

Marinella Arena

Città sospese fra capi e fumare. Strategie identitarie

FrancoAngeli

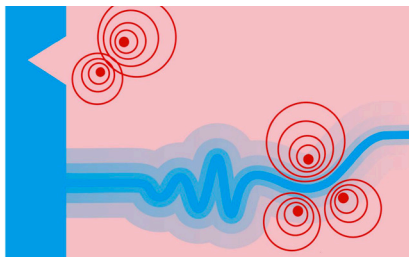
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Marinella Arena

Città sospese fra capi e fumare
Strategie identitarie

Cities suspended between capes and rivers
Identity strategies

FORME DEL DISEGNO
FrancoAngeli

The book by Marinella Arena deals with a crucial topic. Essential. Not only in the subject of her research (historic villages in a state of 'oblivion'), but also – and above all – in the gaze she reserves for small towns, specifically those on the Ionian coast of Sicily. A gaze able to interweave the urban and architectural survey with the immaterial dimensions of which these centers are permeated, through a vision that includes different perceptive levels. A deep interpretation, carried out with the sensitivity that derives from personal experiences, from the cultural context, from immersion in a 'scenery of everyday life' that, as the author emphasizes, has (successfully) conditioned her approach to research. The topic of small towns, which encompass most of Italy's architectural heritage, is still an urgent one. Equally urgent is the need to focus on documentation strategies other than those traditionally used, sometimes well-structured and sometimes uncritical filing, which only rarely succeed in triggering actions to raise awareness, conservation, and enhancement of the identity of places. Precisely in the search for the deepest sense of identity that these centers can convey, the book enucleates a methodology that captures the essential, a knowledge process in which to intersect past, present, and future using the potential of drawing.

The title of the book, *Cities suspended between capes and rivers. Identity strategies*, has the power to immediately recall two

focal points of the perspective vision in which Marinella Arena places herself and leads the reader. The sense of 'suspension' leads to reflect on the dynamics of abandonment that have stopped time in these urban centers, and on *another* time, a time away from the frenetic acceleration that often characterizes our daily actions, a time slowed down, suspended, to condense the perception of place. And then the 'identity strategies', which guide the survey and the cataloguing (and not vice versa), elaborating an overall representation that integrates the immaterial. Indeed, the power of the book is to transport the reader into the places analyzed, so vivid is the perceptive dimension searched, which transcends the purely material facts featuring the six historic centers analyzed.

The comprehensiveness of the research that resulted in this book is evident in the structuring of the data collected and in the graphic representations. After the introductory section, the first chapter frames the history of the villages in the economic and social events to understand the dynamics that led to the depopulation, and consequent crystallization, of the so-called minor centers in southern Italy and the Ionian coast of Sicily in particular. The chapter *For a methodological protocol* frames the survey methodologies applied and describes the logic of the reports produced for each of the towns investigated, namely Forza d'Agro,

Casalvecchio, Mandanici, Fiumedinisi, Ali and Itala. The section *Drawings for an identity map* illustrates the methodological approach of breaking down the centers (between *Urban warps* and *Matrices*) and the graphical processes that succeed, with originality, in proposing a synthesis of great critical-interpretative value. The book closes with the chapter *A network of cities* which, starting from the territorial scale, harmonizes the data collected and develops coordinated forms of communication, 'unifying' the urban centers under analysis, and the bibliographical section, essential but revealing of the multiple suggestions that have contributed to the definition of the methodological approach.

The timeliness of the research lies (also) in the interpretation of the needs that the enhancement of that territory requires, appropriately grasping virtuous connections with some of the strategic actions of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, in particular the digital transition as a necessary first step for the knowledge and protection of the architectural and landscape heritage in marginal areas and minor centers, often the object of inattention rather than care; the search for strategies for effective communication of the identity of places, and the need to broaden the socio-cultural impact of communication itself, as well as sharing with the scientific community.

The six case studies analyzed in this book –defined by the author as minimal cities, "cities suspended between the desire for rebirth and the threat of oblivion" [p. 23]– represent an ideal context for an in-depth study of the topic of small towns. "The network of small towns on the Sicilian Ionian coast is the perfect field of investigation for research that aims to experiment the potential of drawing. In fact, these small

towns preserve the cultural and architectural identity of this portion of Sicily; they are rooted in same economic and cultural substratum, and have preserved, at least in part, an autochthonous language both in the architecture and in urban morphological structure" [Introduction, p. 12]. But, at the same time, the proposed methodology is shaped as replicable, extensible to other contexts and other places equally in need of being discovered, known, 'communicated'. The action of the survey expands beyond the 'simple' measurement to aggregate the intangible aspects to the concreteness of the documented places, and in this sense the concept of "deferred survey" [p. 29] is particularly significant, complementing the direct survey and the instrumental survey, able to record all that is immaterial that animates places.

The methodological protocol structured to document and catalogue the case studies includes a report in which each city analyzed is described and represented by means of aerial photo, live drawing, site plan, restitution of the instrumental survey, axonometric view, texture maps, architectures, architectural details, and the synthetic representation of the Matrix (mother church) and any subsidiary churches. It is worth emphasizing the importance that onsite manual drawing assumes in the documentary process, a drawing that "directs the gaze to the founding elements" [p. 36], guiding observation, consistent with the need to rest to go beyond the visible.

Public space is analyzed as a widespread place able to create links of which an identity map can be drawn by including different levels of interpretation, including the perception and reconstruction of the collective memory of places. An interesting

form of abstraction for describing urban features consists in the decomposition of cities into parcels; blocks are broken down and relocated in a dimensional reference system –the graphic representation of which is reminiscent of musical notes organized on a score– creating textures that highlight complexities, fragmentations, layouts.

At the basis of the urban shape of these centers, the Matrix, or mother church, creates an imprint on the urban morphology and "acts as an attractor of paths and sights, condenses the mass of the urban fabric and defines the skyline of the center" [p. 51]. The graphic symbolism used in the development of the sheets allows for a comparison between the Matrices, through icons that reveal the morphology of the façade, the presence and position of the bell tower; the presence of openings above the main portal, the presence of oculi, the typological structure with naves and halls, the orientation, the morphology of the churchyard and the presence of scroll-works. An analysis of the architectural language then focused on the design of the column as the unit of measurement to which all parts are related. It is in the search for a symbolic and synthetic abstraction (a never easy task) that the author succeeds in describing the complexity of the territory and urban centers through very few elements (churches, fortifications, access routes to the center and the presence of watercourses). The urban aggregates are condensed "into fluid forms to enucleate their founding matrix" [p. 71], in search of traces to be synthesized in identity maps in which the emotional component is translated into an immaterial sense of belonging (*Topophilia*) that places the human being at the center; and where the human being is molded by the inhabited space in a two-way relationship. Graphically,

maps of feeling make explicit the “emotional density of a place” [p. 75], just as the blending of virtual and represented space through the superimposition of historical images in the urban scene captures city life, the memory, and give evidence of the intimate attachment to places.

A further degree of abstraction, aimed at proposing possible strategies of heritage enhancement, is reserved for “ludic permutations” that stimulate a path of knowledge through the recombination of architectural elements.

The book’s concluding chapter delves into the description of the six centers analyzed (historical introduction, urban morphology, architecture, details, Matrix, and filial churches), placing the cities in a territorial, comparative perspective, tracing connections and giving homogeneity to the data collected, an operation at the basis of the proposed methodological protocol and coordinated communication.

Marinella Arena’s study fills a gap by integrating previous knowledge, sys-

tematizing and comparing new data with an unconventional approach in its analytical and representative interpretations.

The book stimulates a reflection that overcomes the specificity of the context analyzed, dealing with ‘irrelevant’ cities, unattractive to contemporary society and the interests it pursues. But these places embody an inestimable heritage. They are our memory.

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